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ABSTRACT

This paper views the assignment of reading materials to individual students as an important clinical judgment task that may significantly affect reading achievement and contends that the first step in any attempt to model clinical judgment is to identify an ecologically valid set of cues for the judgment tasks. It discusses four methods used for this purpose that resulted in a list of 29 book characteristics that were predictive of both student reading preferences and teacher judgments across grades kindergarten through six. It presents evidence for the reliability and validity of this cue list and discusses follow-up research on improving the accuracy of teacher judgment for this task. (Author)

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Thomas E. Evans and Joe L. Byers

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Teacher Judgment of Children's Reading Preferences

Thomas E. Evans and Joe L. Byers[1]

Reading, like any skill, requires practice, yet many children do not like to read; the child who is turned off to reading at an early age is less likely to get the necessary practice. The solution to this problem is to structure reading materials around the interests of the child. This task, however, would require a teacher to periodically assess each child's interests and modify reading assignments accordingly, since children's interests are highly individual and constantly changing (Asher, Note 1). Most teachers have neither the time nor preparation necessary for such a complex judgmental task.

How, then, can teachers identify the reading interests of their students and assign reading material that is stimulating and meaningful to each child? This is the question addressed in the study reported here.

We assume that typical judgments demanded of teachers (including the differential assignment of reading materials) are similar to the type of clinical judgments required of other professionals. Both the psychologist and physician, for example, must gather information, weigh and combine that information, and arrive at a course of action. The teacher, too, must gather, weigh and combine information to arrive at effective differential reading assignments, but there are important differences which make the

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teachers' task more difficult: (1) typically the teacher must make this judgment for 20-30 students; (2) the judgment must fit into a larger system of educational goals.

Yet despite the differences in judgment tasks between teachers and other professionals, it should be possible to apply process training (e.g., Kleinmuntz, 1968) and policy capturing (e.g., Hammond & Summers, 1972) methodologies to gain a better understanding of the variables which may affect teacher judgment. In fact, recent research (Clark, Yinger, & Wildfong, Note 2; Yinger, Note 3) indicates much potential in this approach.

The following section deals with some conceptual issues in the study of the teacher as a clinical judge.

Methodological Issues in Clinical Judgment -- Modeling the Task Environment

To study teacher judgments researchers need to know (1) what information teachers use in making important classroom decisions/judgments (Newell, 1968); (2) how they weigh and combine that information; and (3) how this process might be improved.[2] Whether the researcher is seeking understanding, prediction, or improvement of the judgment process, an adequate model of the task environment is essential.

Einhorn (1974) has argued that as the task environment becomes more complex, there is a corresponding increase in the number of variables that are difficult to define or identify. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that unpredictable systematic variance in judgment will occur. Thus the task of identifying the relevant cues becomes more difficult as environmental complexity increases; and without knowing the relevant cues,

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[2]Brunswick's (1955) Lens Model has been used as a conceptual framework for improving the judgmental accuracy of clinical psychologists, police departments and pathologists (Elstein & Bordage, Note 4).

it is impossible to model the judgmental policy effectively.

Attempts to gain subjective descriptions of the judgmental process are also affected by task complexity. Cook and Stewart (1975) found that, as task complexity increased, judges became less able to apply their judgmental policies and less able to describe what they were doing. Similarly, Kleinmuntz (1968) was less successful in developing an effective process model for a difficult clinical task than for an easier one.

Stage 1 -- Identifying Cues

The identification of all the important cues in a complex judgment task is extremely critical, which makes the study of the task environment for teacher judgment especially complex. For any particular activity or curricular assignment a teacher could be using a combination of student characteristics, contextual cues, and curricular characteristics. Einhorn (1974) suggested that one way to determine the extent to which the researcher has adequately modeled the task environment (i.e. sampled all of the ecologically valid cues) is to correlate systematic unpredictable variance with the criterion, but this method depends on the availability of a valid and reliable criterion.

To model the task environment for teacher judgment of children's reading preferences, we identified a set of ecologically valid cues predictive of both children's preferences (the criterion) and teacher assignments (the judgment). We combined the three most common methods used by researchers (e.g., Clark & Yinger, 1977) in selecting cues for judgment tasks: (1) selecting cues based on experience, theoretical interest, or the empirical literature; (2) having judges rate items as positive or negative, listing the features of those items which contribute

to the positive or negative ratings, and coding those features into meaningful categories; or (3) selecting cues based on the opinions of expert judges. In addition, we used a fourth method -- the analysis of verbal protocols from student interviews and teacher-generated descriptions.

Reviewing the literature. The first step in identifying cues was to review the literature on children's preferences in reading and to identify those features of preferred books which were relevant to our study.

Asher (Note 1), Kagan (1964), and others have argued that the acquisition of reading skills is affected by the meaningfulness of reading materials, that is, children learn to read better if the materials are interesting. Equally important to some educators is the attitude children develop toward reading; reading can be a fun, boring, pleasant, or unpleasant experience. Zimet (1966) found more than 300 studies of children's interests covering a broad and varied range.

Our review of studies on reading preferences, attitudes and achievement, seems to support three major points: (1) Children's reading preferences are consistently related to certain dimensions or features of books which can be reliably coded; (2) Although the dimensions are consistent, patterns of preference within those dimensions are highly individual and changeable; and (3) Reading programs which include individualized interest patterns are likely to improve reading achievement and develop a more positive attitude toward reading.

The most frequently used method to determine what *features* are associated with reading preferences has been content analysis -- a comparison of the features in preferred books and non-preferred or

required books. If such comparisons are to be convincing, it is essential that the dimensions coded can make the necessary discriminations between preferred and non-preferred texts. One successful attempt at discriminative, reliable coding was by Blom, Waite, Zimet, and Wiberg (Note 5). They took 1,307 stories from frequently used primers and had two graduate students code blindly according to the following dimensions: activity (age, sex, and outcome of main activity), character (children, adults, animals, make believe characters, and all combinations of these) and theme (ranging from 'real life' to folk tales, fantasy, and religious themes). The reliability for activity was .93, for character .99, and for theme, .86.

Since the Blom et al. (Note 5) coding method was reliable and comprehensive, Wiberg and Trost (1970) used it in their study of library books preferred by first graders. They compared the content of the primers described by Blom with library books which were selected or not selected from a population of 595 fiction and 44 nonfiction books. They found significant differences in the characters preferred (animals and make-believe) versus not preferred (child and child/adult); also, in themes preferred (folk tales, fantasy, nature, pranks) versus not preferred (outings, active play, pets). Finally, they found that the *sex* of the activity (whether it was an activity most likely to be engaged in by boys, girls, or both) was critical in determining preference. As would be expected, this interacted with the sex of the student. (Boys preferred boy activities, while girls preferred either girl or boy activities.) It was also clear that ambiguous (boy-girl) activities were avoided by all.

Peterson (1972), in a similar study, also found preferences among second graders for certain themes and characters. Fantasy stories about

animals were most preferred, as were adventure themes. Zimet and Camp (Note 6) replicated Wiberg and Trost (1970) with inner-city school children and obtained similar results. Feeley (1972) found that the sex of the reader was a more effective predictor variable among fourth and fifth graders, with boys preferring sports, excitement, and information (e.g. science and crafts), while girls preferred social empathy, fantasy, and recreational activities. This may reflect the increasing importance of sex related roles for older elementary school children.

Ford and Koplyay (1968) developed a method for determining preferences which did not require that the students read the preferred materials. Kindergarten and first graders were presented with booklets of 16 pictures in each of six categories, with four pictures on each page. The students were asked to pick two pictures, one which represented a story they would most like to hear, and one which represented a story they would least like to hear. Second and third graders were presented with 60 sentences in groups of four which described the pictures. They too were asked to select from groups of four the sentences reflecting a most desired and least desired story. They found a dislike of "passive happiness" and "helpful cooperation with adults," which is consistent with findings of Child, Potter, & Levine (1946) and Wiberg and Trost (1970). Also, the study supported earlier evidence that age and sex of activity is important in choice.

Oliver (1977) studied the preferences of first and third graders for stories varying in types of characters and settings (animals in natural settings, children in urban or suburban settings, and fantasy characters in make-believe settings) and type of story. Three professional writers each wrote three stories (one slapstick, one contrived plot, and one peer relationship). Children were reassured that it was alright to be honest if they did not like a story; they were also asked if they

would like to read more stories about the character. There were two significant interactions. First graders liked the animal/natural setting story best, followed by realistic and fantasy characters, which were preferred equally. Story type also interacted with grade level with peer stories least preferred by first graders and most preferred by third graders. Finally, the correlation between ratings and "wanting to hear another story about the character" was .72, indicating that the rating scale was somewhat reliable.

Other methods that have been used in studying reading preferences include questionnaires and interviews (e.g. Taylor & Schneider, 1967; Young, 1955), group discussions (Gunderson, 1957), and the analysis of reading choices during voluntary sharing periods. These studies and others using methods similar to these described above have produced results which are for the most part similar to those discussed. In general we found that field studies are unable to sort out the effects of naturally confounded variables, while experimental studies have problems of representativeness, measurement, and scope.

The results of these studies may be summarized in the following manner: (1) Preferences are consistently associated with variations in type of character (animals, fantasy, peer group, parent-child), type of activity (sex-related and age-related) and type of theme (realism, fantasy, adventure/heroism, pranks and humor, and information), and (2) *Patterns of preference* are likely to depend a great deal on the sex and age of the child.

Asher (Note 1) has cautioned that in spite of some general preference patterns, children's reading preferences are highly individualized and changeable. In a study in which children were encouraged to share with other students their ideas and enthusiasm for books which they selected to read, very few children read the same books. Thus even when children

advertised their favorite books to other students, the preference patterns of the other students remained highly individual. Asher also points out that the test-retest correlation of children's interest ratings for a four-month period (although high for some children) was, on the average, quite low (.47 among 44 fifth graders). Thus it seems that if a teacher is to consider reading interests when making reading assignments, he/she should periodically assess the interests of individual children along the dimensions suggested above (character, theme, and activities preferred), because one assessment at the beginning of the year is not enough (Asher, 1978).

The question remaining is whether a reading program that incorporates individualized reading preferences can be expected to improve reading achievement and produce positive attitudes toward reading.

Researchers have manipulated both the variables which affect interest and interest itself to determine what effects these manipulations would have on achievement, attitude, and reading behavior. For example, Stanchfield (1973) introduced "boy-oriented" basals, which resulted in a significant improvement in reading skills for boys (in comparison with a control group). Zimet, Rose, Blom, Parsons, and Camp (Note 7) compared two first-grade classes, one using a standard primer, the other using a "higher-interest" primer. Both classes showed equal achievement, but the "interest" class showed more positive scores on measures of reading attitude, and more reading as free choice activity.

Asher (Note 1) reviewed two studies which indicated that high-interest reading programs are especially beneficial for boys. He suggested that boys benefit more than girls from these programs because boys generally have more narrowly-defined interests than girls and hence, may lack the relevant schema for comprehending a broader range

of reading materials. In assessing the long-term effectiveness of high-interest reading programs, Asher was cautiously optimistic. He pointed out that, although most comparative program evaluations have been confounded by other program elements, the high-interest programs have frequently been associated with substantial gains in reading achievement (e.g. Gormli & Nittoli, 1971; Stanchfield, 1973).

After our literature review, the second step we took to identify important features of books (cues for the judgment task) was to analyze verbal protocols of student interviews. We presented to a group of 11 fourth-grade students (six boys, five girls) a set of 36 book descriptions (from a representative sample of children's books), 18 each at two different sessions. The children were asked to select five to 10 books that they liked and to describe why they liked each one. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for indications of cue importance.

The third step was to elicit the opinion of "expert" judges. The literature review, protocols, and choices of pupils (plus a representative set of book descriptions) were presented to a panel of experts. This panel included researchers experienced in the study of judgment, and experts in children's literature. After considerable deliberation, a list of cues was developed for the final validation phase.

Finally, we attempted to validate our cue selection by selecting and coding a new sample of books (see Appendix A) along the dimensions selected by the expert panel. These book descriptions were presented to the same fourth-grade children for selection. The children's choices were correlated with the presence or absence of the coded cues to determine (1) if the cue list accounted for a significant amount of variation in choices and (2) if the cues were relatively independent (a desirable condition for using a Lens Model Analysis).

The multiple correlations for prediction of the children's choices ranged from a low of .516 to a high of .727, indicating that the coded cues account for a substantial amount of variance in children's book selections. The 23 cues (later expanded to 29 -- see Appendix B) yielded 253 intercorrelations. Of these less than 6% exceeded .3 and only one exceeded .45. These results indicate an absence of multicolinearity among the cues, a desirable finding.

Two additional predictor variables were then added to the analysis. Since the number of pages per book was included in the book descriptions, it seemed reasonable that some students might prefer longer or shorter books; hence we added book length as a variable. (The book length variable improved predictability for only one student.) Also, recent research indicates that the book selections of most students are not affected by feedback from peers (Asher, Note 1). It is unclear, however, whether the popularity of a book would influence the selections of some students. To test this, we entered the number of times a book was selected as a predictor variable. The results indicated that book popularity defined in this manner improved the predictability of student choices substantially for five students, with little effect on the predictability of the remaining six students. This indicates that book popularity is an important cue for some students, but unimportant for others. Appendix C depicts the significant raw regression weights for each student on all cues. These data represent the extent to which each of the original 23 cues influenced a particular student's selections, i.e. they represent the 'policy' for each student's book selections. In an extension of the present study we will use data similar to these in graphical form to provide process feedback (Hammond, 1971) for improving teacher judgment of children's reading preferences.

Stage 2 -- Dimensions of Importance for Teacher Judgment

A sequence of activities to determine the dimensions considered by teachers in making reading assignments is also under way.

First, we are asking 12 elementary teachers participating in the study to write a one-or two-paragraph description for each of 10 of their students.[3] The teachers are asked to "... include any information, personal, social, or academic, which you would provide to a substitute teacher who would have the responsibility of giving independent reading assignments to these 10 children for an extended period of time. The information should help the substitute in assigning books which would be interesting and/or of educational value to the children."

Next, we will analyze the teacher-generated descriptions for indicants of cue importance, and any consistently important cues not included in the cue list developed earlier will be added to that list.

Finally, we will attempt to validate teachers' cue selections by having teachers select from a representative sample of book descriptions (1) books which they would have the whole class read, and (2) books they would assign to the individual students described above. The teacher assignments will be correlated with the presence or absence of coded cues to determine the dimensions of importance for teachers in making independent reading assignments, and the extent to which teacher policies are general or differential.

Stage 3 -- Reliability Constraints

There are three potential sources of constraint on the measured judgmental accuracy, which would be measurement artifacts and which should therefore be removed statistically. First is the coding of

[3] We randomly selected eight girls and eight boys from each of the 12 classes, then asked the teachers to narrow those selections to five boys and five girls.

cues. Although earlier studies have obtained high reliability using coding schemes similar to ours, it is essential to establish coding reliability for the cue list in this study by having judges code the sample of book descriptions independently. Next, the reliability of the criterion, i.e. children's preferences, should be determined by inserting identical book descriptions within two or three different selection tasks. Finally, the reliability of teacher assignments should be measured similarly. The consistency of these three indices will provide an upper limit for the ecological validity of the criteria and ultimately for the teacher's judgmental accuracy.

To determine coding reliability for the final cue list, five persons (two researchers, one language arts specialist, and two graduate students) coded book descriptions for 33 books independently. (This was done in fall 1978 with a different set of book descriptions). The cue list, following additional discussions with experts, was expanded from 23 to 29 dimensions.

The intra-class correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the reliability of the average rating across judges for each book, since it is the average rating which is entered into the Lens Model analysis. The reliability of coding, measured in this manner, ranged from a low of .853 to a high of 1.00. The average reliability across all books was .928.

While at present we do not have estimates of the reliability of student preferences and teacher judgments since these estimates require a complete Lens Model analysis, a study is currently being conducted which will provide these estimates.

Conclusions

In the present paper we have attempted to model the task environment for teachers' judgments of student reading preferences. For the task of selecting preferred books this involved the identification of an ecologically valid set of cues for predicting student and teacher selections.

In the present study, we used four methods to achieve this purpose: (1) A review of relevant research literature; (2) the analysis of verbal protocols; (3) consultation with experts in the area of reading preferences, and (4) validation of the predictive validity of the final cue list. In addition, we have established the reliability of coding this cue list, and developed a method for providing process feedback for improving judgmental accuracy.

Research is under way in which the cues identified in the present study will serve as predictor variables for modeling teacher judgment of reading preferences. The follow-up research will include a comparison of the effectiveness of various types of feedback for improving teacher judgment, as well as process measures to improve the accuracy of the judgmental model being developed.

Since reading preferences are a continuously changing, affective behavior, the predictive validity of the cue list in the present study is quite impressive. Still, we are working on expanding the list to increase predictability. Further research will determine the extent to which teachers use the same cues as students; what teacher and pupil variables are related to the teachers judgmental accuracy on this task; and what type of feedback is optimal for improving judgmental accuracy on this task.

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Appendix A

A List of the Titles and Authors of Books Which Were Used in Stage 1* (cue identification), Indicating Their Numerical Designations in the Scholastic Magazine for 1977.

1. THE TV KID -- Byers
2. STORMY, MISTY'S FOAL -- Henry
3. THE CHOCOLATE COOKBOOK -- Mager
4. THE SECRET CAVE -- Bishop
5. SILVER FOX -- Shyer
6. ME AND THE TERRIBLE TWO -- Conford
7. A SUPER FULLBACK FOR THE SUPER BOWL -- Gault
8. THE SHY ONE -- Nathan
9. FUN WITH SCIENCE -- Freeman
10. ALVIN'S SWAP SHOP -- Hicks
11. PUZZLE BLAST -- Fellows
12. THE DOLLHOUSE CAPER -- O'Connell
13. THEY LED THE WAY: 14 AMERICAN WOMEN -- Johnston
14. JOCK'S ISLAND -- Coatsworth
15. STRANGE BUT TRUE AUTO RACING STORIES -- Powell
16. THE RESCUERS -- Sharp
17. THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN: THE SECRET OF BIGFOOT PASS -- Jahn
18. A CHRISTMAS CAROL -- Dickens
19. HOLIDAY GREETING CARDS, TO CUT, COLOR, AND SEND -- Eaton
20. DYNAMITE #42 -- An Arrow Exclusive Each Month
21. CHARLIE BROWN'S SUPER BOOK OF THINGS TO DO AND COLLECT
22. NANCY DREW AND THE HARDY BOYS -- Herz
23. THE HOBOKEN CHICKEN EMERGENCY -- Pinkwater
24. LOUIS BRAILLE -- Davidson
25. PAPER CAPERS: ALL KINDS OF THINGS TO MAKE WITH PAPER -- Temko

*Data collected in Spring 1978

26. JUSTIN MORGAN HAD A HORSE -- Henry

27. SHOESHINE GIRL -- Bulla

28. ARROW BOOK OF SPORTS STORIES -- Simon, ed.

29. THE MYSTICAL BEAST -- Farthing

30. PROJECT CAT -- Burchardt

31. JUNIOR SCIENCE BOOK OF ICEBERGS AND GLACIERS -- Lauber

32. THE CONTEST KID AND THE BIG PRIZE -- Wallace

33. Poster: PUPPY 'N' KITTEN -- 22" x 25"

34. FIVE TRUE DOG STORIES -- Davidson

35. THE WONDERFUL FLIGHT TO THE MUSHROOM PLANET -- Cameron

36. NOODLES, NITWITS AND NUMSKULLS -- Leach

37. MYSTERY OF THE MISSING PAINTING -- Anderson

38. WHAT'S NEW, MISTER MAGOO? --

39. THE INCREDIBLE JOURNEY -- Burnford

40. THE HOUSE WITHOUT A CHRISTMAS TREE -- Rock

41. DYNAMITE #43 -- An Arrow Exclusive Each Month

42. THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK OF HOUSE PLANTS -- Faust

43. TV TIME '78 -- Herz

44. KING OF THE WIND -- Henry

45. STOWAWAY TO THE MUSHROOM PLANET -- Cameron

46. THE SHART LADY -- McGovern

47. GRIMMS' Fairy Tales -- Kramer, ed.

48. MYSTERY OF MONSTER MOUNTAIN -- Carey

49. MY DAD LIVES IN A DOWNTOWN HOTEL -- Mann

50. BETTINA'S SECRET -- Hallquist

51. THE YOUNG GRIZZLY -- Dixon

52. THE GHOST THAT CAME ALIVE -- Crume

53. THE DYNAMITE PARTY BOOK -- Aber

54. Poster: WILD COUGAR -- 22" x 34"

55. WILD ANIMAL SHELTER -- Kellner

56. THE SECRET IN MIRANDA'S CLOSET -- Greewald

57. SNOWBOUND IN HIDDEN VALLEY -- Wilson

58. 101 HAMBURGER JOKES -- Hirsch

59. THE GOLD SMUGGLERS -- Voight

60. TWO AGAINST THE NORTH -- Mowat

61. ALL-PRO BASKETBALL START 1978 -- Weber

Appendix B

Cues

BOOK TYPE:

1. Biography
2. Information Science
3. Information History
4. Information Other
5. Fantasy
6. Science Fiction
7. Folk Tales, Fables & Myths
8. Historical Fiction
9. Realistic Fiction
10. Poetry
11. Picture Book

BOOK THEME:

12. Coping
13. Danger
14. Devotion
15. Heroism
16. Home and Family Theme
17. Humor
18. Sports
19. Horrible and Hideous
20. Death
21. Drugs and Alcohol
22. Mystery and Surprise
23. Survival
24. Male Character
25. Female Character
26. Animal (not horses)
27. Horse
28. Significant Others
29. Peers

CUES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
TV and/or Movies	.462	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Crafts	.000	.000	.664	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	-.744
Jokes / Riddles / and/or Games	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	-.596	.000	.000	.594	.000	.000
Science	.000	.726	.000	.000	.000	-.847	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
History	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Biography	.000	.532	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.797	.000	.000
Information	.000	-.474	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Mystery or Surprise	.000	-.385	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Danger and/or Coping	.000	.000	.000	.000	.400	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Horrible or Hideous	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.530	.000
Fantasy or Science Fiction	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	-.400	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Family Theme	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	-.710	.000	.000	.000	.867	.000
Devotion or Heroism	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Cinderella	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Parent Wrong	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Silly Stories	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.532	.000	.000	.000
Animals	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Horses	.000	-.731	.000	-.701	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Female Character	-.411	.000	.000	.390	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Male Character	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	-.398	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Sports	.000	.567	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Length of Book in Pages	.000	.000	.004	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Proportion of Times Book Was Selected	1.209	2.341	.000	1.350	.000	.000	.000	1.200	.000	1.618	.000

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